

trouble' and of unfairly elevating the hopes and aspirations of indigenous Australians who had to face white hostility after the students had departed. What do you think about the actions of the SAFA students? To clarify your thoughts about this question and hear the ideas of others, complete the following activity.

Attitudinal scale

Set up an attitudinal scale by drawing a line on the whiteboard or along the floor, designating one end as 'strongly agree' and the other as 'strongly disagree'. Alternatively, divide the room into four opinion corners labelled as 'strongly agree', 'somewhat agree', 'strongly disagree', and 'somewhat disagree', leaving the centre of the room for 'undecided'. You are to move to the spot along the line, or within the room, that best represents your opinion on the following statements:

- The SAFA students participated in the Freedom Ride for fun and to get publicity for themselves.
- Given similar circumstances and the opportunity, I would have taken part in the Freedom Ride.

Once you have stated your opinion, or moved to your chosen corner, discuss as a class the reasons for your choice.

The Gurindji strike

While the Freedom Ride primarily involved white, middle-class students from the city, the next significant event in the indigenous protest movement was led by traditional indigenous people — the Gurindji from remote northern Australia.

On 23 August 1966, one and a half years after the Freedom Ride, Vincent Lingiari led eighty indigenous workers and their 120 dependents in a walk-off from Wave Hill Station. Wave Hill was a cattle station, 600 kilometres south-west of Katherine in the Northern Territory, and owned by the British Vestey group of companies. The Vestey company was the largest employer of indigenous labour in the Northern Territory.

The immediate cause of the strike was the refusal of Vestey's manager at Wave Hill to meet Vincent Lingiari's request that indigenous stockmen be paid \$25 per week. Indigenous stockmen endured terrible working and living conditions on Wave Hill Station. Not only were their wages low and irregular but their rations were meagre, they lived in 'kennel-like' housing, sanitation was inadequate, and the indigenous women were subjected to sexual abuse and coercion. Vincent Lingiari and other indigenous men protested: 'Bin treat me fella all time like a dog.'

Even a Northern Territory Government inquiry held in the mid-1930s said of the Vestey's management: 'It was obvious that they had been... quite ruthless in denying their Aboriginal labour proper access to basic human rights.' Yet until 1968 it was still illegal to pay an indigenous worker more than a certain amount in goods and money. For many people, even their minimal government benefits were paid into the accounts of the pastoral companies, over which indigenous people had no control.

What began as an industrial dispute over appalling wage and living conditions soon developed into a demand by the Gurindji people for the return of their traditional lands. Author Frank Hardy, who wrote a book about the strike, *The Unlucky Australians* (1968) was told: 'We want them Vestey mob all go away from here. Wave Hill Aboriginal people bin called Gurindji. We bin here long time before them Vestey mob. This is our country, all this bin Gurindji country. Wave Hill bin our country. We want this land; we strike for that.'

Months after the original strike began, Vincent Lingiari led his people to establish a settlement at Wattie Creek, known to them as Daguragu, within the Wave Hill lease. When Lord Vestey attempted to get the Gurindji to leave Wattie Creek and return to work on the station, with inducements including money wages, Vincent Lingiari told him: 'You can keep your gold, we just want our land back.'

The strike lasted eight years, and over that time a significant movement of political and practical support built up across Australia. The Gurindji walk-off was not the first time that indigenous Australians had demanded their lands back from the white colonisers in Australia. However, it was the struggle that attracted broad

public support for land rights, nationally and internationally. Finally, in 1975, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam handed back to the Gurindji people the rights to some of their traditional lands (see also source 5.18, page 149).

The story of Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji walk-out has been immortalised in the song 'From Little Things Big Things Grow' below. If a copy is available at your school, ask your teacher to play it for you.

SOURCE 5.11 Song lyrics — 'From Little Things Big Things Grow'

British beef
baron who held
a pastoral lease over
Wave Hill cattle station,
Northern Territory

On 26 August
1966, two hundred
Gurindji men, women
and children were
involved in a
'walk-off' strike.

Vincent Lingiari
and others travelled
around Australia to drum
up support for the
strikers.

GATHER round people let me tell you a story
An eight year long story of power and pride
British **Lord Vestey** and **Vincent Lingiari**
Were opposite men on opposite sides

Vestey was fat with money and muscle
Beef was his business, broad was his door
Vincent was lean and spoke very little
He had no bank balance, hard dirt was his floor

From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow

Gurindji were working for **nothing but rations**
Where once they had gathered the wealth of the land
Daily the pressure got tighter and tighter
Gurindji decided they must make a stand

They picked up their swags and **started off walking**
At **Wattie Creek** they sat themselves down
Now it don't sound like much but it sure got tongues talking
Back at the homestead and then in the town

From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow

Vestey man said I'll double your wages
Seven quid a week you'll have in your hand
Vincent said uhuh we're not talking about wages
We're sitting right here **till we get our land**

Vestey man roared and Vestey man thundered
You don't stand the chance of a cinder in snow
Vince said if we fall others are rising

From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow

Then Vincent Lingiari boarded an aeroplane
Landed in Sydney, big city of lights
And daily he went round softly **speaking his story**
To all kinds of men from all walks of life

Indigenous elder
from the Gurindji tribe,
1919–88

In 1966, most
indigenous stockmen
received \$10.00 per week;
the minimum Commonwealth
basic wage was \$34.75
per week, while the
average wage was
\$61.70.

They moved
to Wattie Creek
in April 1967.
This was the location
of traditional lands
— known as
Daguragu.

The nature of
the strike changed
from a wage claim
to a land claim.

In 1969, the Coalition government was given a proposal to return eight square kilometres of the Wave Hill pastoral lease to the Gurindji. Cabinet refused to discuss the issue.

The 'tall stranger' was Prime Minister Gough Whitlam

In 1992, the Vestey Group sold off its Australian properties. Lord Sam Vestey returned to Australia in 2003 but expressed no intention of investing in Australia again

And Vincent sat down with big politicians
This affair they told him is a matter of state
Let us sort it out, your people are hungry
Vincent said no thanks, we know how to wait

From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow

Then Vincent Lingiari returned in an aeroplane
Back to his country once more to sit down
And he told his people let the stars keep on turning
We have **friends in the south**, in the cities and towns

Eight years went by, eight long years of waiting
Till one day a **tall stranger** appeared in the land
And he came with lawyers and he came with great ceremony
And through Vincent's fingers poured a **handful of sand**

From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow

That was the story of Vincent Lingiari
But this is the story of something much more
How **power and privilege** can not move a people
Who know where they stand and stand in the law

From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow

There were demonstrations and arrests in southern Australia in support of the walk-off. Many churches, students, trade unionists and members of the Communist Party of Australia gave practical and fundraising support to the Gurindji struggle.

On 16 August 1975, the Gurindji people received from the Prime Minister a pastoral lease for 1250 square miles, formerly part of the Wave Hill pastoral lease

Paul Kelly/Kevin Carmody

Responding to the song lyrics

1. The chorus of this song 'From little things big things grow' might be considered a truism — a statement of undisputed fact and truth. As it applies to the Gurindji strike, what do you consider is the essential meaning behind this statement of truth?
2. Vincent Lingiari is celebrated as one of the greatest indigenous leaders of the twentieth century. In 1977, he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia. In 1996, a lecture series, the Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture, was inaugurated in his honour and in 2001 the Lingiari Foundation was formed to advance indigenous rights and promote the reconciliation process. Based on the information provided, what makes Lingiari such a great Australian and worthy of such tributes?

Government response

Faced with a rising tide of public concern and international condemnation, several Australian state governments began to repeal their most discriminatory pieces of legislation. Overt forms of racial discrimination were removed from State and Commonwealth legislation in the 1960s. In 1959, the Commonwealth granted all indigenous Australians, except those classed 'nomadic or primitive', pensions, unemployment and maternity allowances.